The Ethics of

the Eighth Century Prophets

Recovering ethical starting points in a materialistic age

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Introduction
Recession and Self-Interest

In recent days individuals have voiced their opinions regarding President Obama’s use of taxpayer monies to support the individuals who are suffering under the current economic crisis. Many of the reactions have not been positive. Due to a drastic recession, the number of people unemployed in the United States has reached 12 million.¹ This figure is startling, but it does not vividly capture the problem. What is far more startling is the attitude of those who joined rallies in “the streets in over 30 US cities Friday, representing what some of them call the beginning of a new conservative counterculture in America.”² These individuals reportedly rallied against the notion of sharing resources communally, as proposed in the Obama stimulus package.³

It is not my intention, nor is it my expertise, to discuss politics in this paper. What the stimulus plan represents as a piece of political doctrine may or may not be a counter-capitalist or socialist; that debate will continue. What cuts to


³. Ibid.
the core of this issue, and what links it closely with the message of the eighth century prophets are the comments made by an anonymous commentator speaking as a conservative Republican in the north western United States: “it is in fact immoral to take from some people to redistribute to other people.”

Lowell Ponte adds that “this is deeply unethical, anti-Christian politics that turns those who selfishly vote for such piracy into a politician’s morally debased accomplices in theft.” Further, that a policy that legitimizes taking from those who have amassed wealth and giving it to others violates the Ten Commandments. Obviously the reaction has been sharp, given, even, to appeals based on religion.

The economic recession provides an interesting and poignant background upon which to mount a discussion of the eight century prophets. Commentators, as shown above, are not shy to make reference to biblical materials in their arguments against the idea of sharing wealth. In a perplexing turn of phrase one claims that it is ‘selfish’ to give up what one has earned. Even in an environment where unemployment numbers have skyrocketed, there are some who, with tooth, nail, and Decalogue, seem to oppose the notion of

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4. “Going Galt,” NW Republican, http://nwrepublican.blogspot.com/2009/03/going-gault.html (accessed March 12, 2009). This particular individual goes on to claim that ‘neo-evangelicals’ have taken this farther than Jesus’ intended and makes people no longer a help but a slave to neighbor.


6. Ibid.
sharing the resources needed for survival. But is their appeal to biblical material one that can stand the test of analysis? Or, would prophets such as Amos and Micah decry their approach as they did the unjust leaders of Israel?

**Thesis and Approach**

I contend that they indeed would. Contemporary commentators go to biblical sources and use them as a framework to support ideals that they do not. It is my argument that the same thing was being done in Israel: the affluent class imported their own principles or values – the ones that created an atmosphere of social injustice – onto the religious system and then turned around to celebrate, enshrine, and reinforce those principles in the cult. Religious practice and rituals, having once belonged to Yahweh, became degraded to the point where they began to promote principles that were opposite to Yahweh’s commands and covenant. Ethically speaking, the principles that once found their source in Yahweh were replaced by human-founded principles. Yet, because it seems to be a human need to find and undergird ethical principles in some authority, regardless of how shadowy, idols and cultic practice became the token source for inequitable human principles. The prophets brought serious challenge to these human-founded principles and criticized the religious mockery that enshrined them. This paper seeks to explore the reaction of the eight century prophets’ to social injustice, discover the shift that took place in
the principles of communal life, and identify the ethical source(s) to which they implored the people return.

**Ethical Terminology**

A very brief definition of terms is in order at this point. Simply put, the task of ethics is to determine what is right and wrong. An ethical investigation attempts to discover (1) the source or reference point to which one appeals for making that determinations and (2) the reasoning process employed in determining how that source applies to the particular situation. Several approaches have been developed. One is a deontological ethic. This approach identifies a source of right and wrong principles and behaviors outside of the human being in a source such divine law. Teleological ethics locate that source inside the human being’s ability to rationally assess what is the ‘greatest good’ and then develop a way of living that leads to that good. Both of these approaches recognize an objective source for the practical identification of good and bad, thus they are known as cognitivist.

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7. An expanded description of the ethical terminology relevant to this paper can be found at sabutler.wordpress.com as “Ethical Terminology.”


10. Abelson and Nielsen, 90.
Noncognitivism is the general name for a branch of ethics that does not recognize an objective and factual referent for right and wrong. Rather, proponents of this type of approach find the source for moral and ethical judgments in the individual’s intuitive or emotional assessment of the particular situation. The human being is the sole reference point because no other referent is available (or desirable); Joseph Jensen refers to this as autonomous ethics and this term will be used as it is much easier to spell.

**Eighth Century Israel and Judah**

**Prosperity and Expansion**

The eight century prophets, contrary to recession, conducted their ministries when there was a measure of prosperity in the land. During the time leading up to Amos’ ministry, Israel enjoyed a respite from the encroachment of neighboring powers. Assyria occupied the attention of Syria and eliminated them as a threat to Israel. Not having to focus attention to the task of defending borders and repelling the threatening Syrians, Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah of Judah had freedom to extend their borders nearly as far as they had been in

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under the united monarchies of David and Solomon. Economic partners were gained and a network of trade routes became available. “In addition to the renewal of trade, industrial activities flourished, herds grew, and agriculture flourished. The era of peace and prosperity… extended to a wealthy class of society mainly made up of the nobility, officers, and merchants.”

Amos’ description of the fruits of a vigorous economy in Israel included building projects, abundant vineyards and herds, ivory and gold decorations, tables burdened with food and wine, expensive fragrances, “novel music,” and residences for both summer and winter. The royal administrations of Israel and Judah took great advantage of the freedom to expand not only borders but personal assets. As wealth came barging through the open door a set of human-centered principles began to creep in as well.

Isaiah adds to the portrait of Israel’s prosperity not long after the time of Amos when he reports of Hezekiah giving a tour of his large treasure house in 39:1-4. In a sequence that reads like the Queen of Sheba’s tour of Solomon’s storehouse (I Kings 10:1-4; II Chron. 9:1-4), the passage reinforces for the reader an image of material abundance. During Hezekiah’s reign the prosperity and


freedom was not as great as that under Jeroboam and Uzziah. Sennacherib of Assyria was a more direct threat to Judah than his predecessors Tiglath-pileser and Sargon had been, and so the prosperity of earlier days waned. The bent towards materialism, however, waned little and the attitude of dependence on wealth that existed for Jeroboam and Uzziah carried down to Hezekiah’s own day. Hezekiah learned a hard lesson when, in Jerusalem, Sennacherib had him “shut up like a bird in a cage” and he had to trust only in Yahweh’s deliverance. Material abundance was a major factor in the context of the prophetic message, as we shall see, because it caused a myriad of social problems.

Oppression and Injustice

As it turns out, economic prosperity and social prosperity do not always run concurrently.

The prophet Amos is arguably the most passionate of all the prophets in his attitude toward poverty. In his view, poverty is

16. LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 280.

17. “Furthermore, such social misdemeanours are linked, uniquely, to the political attitudes of the leaders of Judean society who are their perpetrators, and specifically to their attitudes towards other nations. The leaders are condemned for their willingness to forge alliances to avert the various military threats of the eighth century.” John Barton, "Ethics in the Book of Isaiah," Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah, Vol. 1, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, 67-77 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 69. It was not just materialism that was the problem but the culture of dependence on anything but Yahweh, foreign nations included.


basically the result of social, political, legal, and economic injustice. 
...Israel was at the height of its prosperity, yet the poor were at the height of poverty.\textsuperscript{20}

A clear picture of the abhorrent social situation is sketched by Amos in an inclusio extending from 2:6 to 8:6. The poor are trampled upon as if they have no rights at all; not only do they lack the resources they need, but they are viewed as commodities to be exploited by the wealthy land owners. The poor are worthless, valued as one values a sandal (Amos 2:6; 8:6). The central element in the chiastic structure, and the most important of Amos’ message, is that justice is denied to the poor.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, not only has Israeliite society allowed a lower class of poor to grow, and have made them worthless by dispossessing them from the land, but have reinforced the system by giving them no recourse in the justice system. These are the practical effects of Israel’s prosperity; the principles that undergird social ethics were influenced heavily by wealth.

Isaiah’s prophecy decries the same sort of actions in Judah where those who where most in need of the justice and care of society where the ones targeted by oppressive statutes and made into ‘prey’ (10:1-2). Micah takes the scathing observation even further noting that it is the leaders of Israel who actively pervert justice and equity in the land (3:1, 9). Those who wish to expand their own estates work hard, to the point of losing sleep, so that they can gain


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 106-7.
the lands of the poor. “These wealthy landowners stay up late calculating how best to lay claim, one by one, to small farms on the outskirts of town.”22 The system of justice has been perverted not by some oversight, but by deliberate, active individuals who seek more and more for themselves.

Self-Interest

This is a critical point to the topic at hand: the interests of the individual became the motivation for the actions he or she took in society. No longer are Yahweh’s interests or the interests of the good of the community the driving factor. Instead, the individual’s desires became the reference point for his or her actions in society. Vivid class differences, a deepening channel of poverty, and the lack of justice for those who were impoverished came as a result of the prosperous seeking more. The ends that the affluent sought were achieved by the means of inequality and oppression. Isaiah announces the Lord’s assessment of the situation:

Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, and they delight to draw near to God. ‘Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’ Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers (Isa. 58:2-3 NRSV).23

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23. Emphasis added.
The indictment of the Lord’s prophet was that the oppressors were seeking their own interests and forsook the directions or ethics of the Lord. Human interests and priorities replaced Yahweh as the source of proper society and upright behavior.

**Corruption of Religion**

Connected very closely to human self-interest are the prophetic rebukes against the religious practice. Above, Isaiah indicated that fasting did not result in knowing the will of God because self-interest dominated. Hosea identifies the same problem: the peoples’ pursuit of God in rituals such as fasting and sacrifice were completely disconnected from Yahweh. The people of Israel were taken by the desire to worship foreign gods (3:1), join themselves to idols (4:17) and defile themselves by breaking their relationship to Yahweh (6:10). It was no small wonder that social justice would degrade when the source of communal values, Yahweh, was abandoned for those false gods that propped up self-sufficiency.\(^{24}\) Amos’ makes a profound and undeniable connection between the nations surrounding Israel and Israel itself in his oracle against the nations (1:3-2:16). To Israel’s surprise they are listed in the same oracle alongside their awful neighbors; what is more shocking is that Israel does to its own community what the other nations do to each other.\(^{25}\) The prophet’s assessment of Israel is


found in the same location as its neighbors because all of them found their source of ethical behavior in the same place: false gods.

It comes as no surprise then to read that Yahweh has singled out Israel’s most important sanctuary at Bethel for special destruction (3:14; 9:1). It cannot stand as a symbol of national security and a centre for celebration; it will come down because the Yahweh worshipped there is a creation of the human imagination. That god is a god without justice, a deity without scruples, a Yahweh of national glory and the protector of the status quo.²⁶

It was to false gods that individuals in power made their appeal.

The Problem: Autonomous Ethics

The Nature of Idols

It is critical to understand that in reality gods and idols of other nations were not deities competing for supremacy with Yahweh; no security council of the United Deities existed to discuss and propose values and action plans for the development of societies. The gods of other nations did not make moral demands²⁷; they did not provide the first principles or serve as the deontological sources for a community that embodied justice and care for the poor. In fact, these gods and idols were physical representations and sources of appeal for nothing more than human attitudes and values. They embodied and propped


²⁷. Jensen, 103.
up the very values that led to a corrupt society. Finding this message in Isaiah, John Barton says that root of social oppression for the prophet was found in human pride. Pride caused individuals to replace Yahweh with images. These images were, in reality, a way for those individuals to worship themselves.  

28 It was not that gods with different ideals competed with Yahweh, but the attitudes of men and women that were in competition. Amos, too, pointed out that source of ethical decisions shifted to so that “[hu]man[s] became the measure of all things on both the individual and institutional level. …this arrogant pride blinded the Israelites and led to a change in their whole outlook and system of values.”  

29 The Enshrinement of Ideals

One of the major criticisms of organized religion is that it uses a frightful deity to scare people into acting a certain way. The strong manipulate the weak for their own purposes and appeal to some powerful source in order to elicit compliance.  

30 This is what we find occurring, in a sense, in the days of the eighth century prophets as they decried the cultic practices of Israel and Judah. The proper source for deontological ethics, Yahweh’s character, covenant, and

28. Barton, 69-70, 73-74. Barton identifies, moreover, the proper Jewish attitude toward idolatry: “The perception of foreign gods is not particularly common in the Old Testament, where it is commoner to present such gods as dangerous rivals to Yahweh. The view that eventually established itself in Judaism, however, was that all other gods are to be seen as ‘nothings’ or ‘idols,’ trivial beings whom it was mere idiocy to worship” (74).

29. Berthoud, 105, 106.

commands, had been replaced by idols that represented autonomous or human-centered principles.

Cultic practices were designed originally to emphasize Yahweh’s holiness. Sacrifice and cleanliness were elements that drove home, for the participants, the seriousness of maintaining the proper respect for, and relationship with, Yahweh. The cultic system emphasized the seriousness of wrong doing, and the values of Yahweh were emphasized as vitally important to the individual.31 When that relationship was treated with care, the relationships in the community were also treated with care.32 The prophetic denouncements of the cultic system were uttered not because Yahweh’s prescriptions for cultic practice were corrupt, but because the leadership had tainted the practices and used them to enshrine a source of ethics that was not of Yahweh, but human. When it functioned properly, the cult was a “witness and embodiment of the practice of communion with Yahweh, in Yahweh’s true character as sovereign and merciful”; it taught and sustained proper ethical practice in community.33 Critics of religion are correct when they oppose the oppressive regimes and unjust societies. They are also correct when they identify human beings and their quest


32. Jensen, 28-29. Jensen refers to the strong connection between the ‘vertical’ relationship and the ‘horizontal’ relationship, that is, the relationship to God (vertical) directly impacts the relations within society (horizontal).

for supremacy as the motivators for erecting false ideals. The critics must realize that Yahweh, too, sees the oppression and injustice and has a stern view of it. He is not an idol that is to manipulated for the good of a few, but a fountainhead of ethical principles that result in justice for the weak and food for the hungry.

**The Solution: Yahweh as the Standard**

Covenant

When Yahweh is the ethical first principle, not autonomous human beings, the result is healthy community. Micah introduces Yahweh as the deontological source of ethics when he speaks to Israel about their covenant obligations. He cites Yahweh first as the exemplar:

34. See also, Carroll, 86, 90.

35. *Italics* added. cp. Isa. 58:6-7. Cyril Rodd (292) is unsure of the validity of appealing to covenant as a basis for ethical teaching, but confirms that Hosea does make reference to it, even if he is the only eighth century prophet to do so in a very direct manner.
the people of Israel, but the norm to which they must return\textsuperscript{36} for the restoration of good community.

\textbf{Deuteronomic Code}

In addition to the precedent of covenant relationship, another appeal to Yahweh as the source of ethics is found in the Deuteronomic Code. This code, found in Deuteronomy 12, 16, 28:1-6, 16-19, is intensely interested in the other and not in self. It makes provisions for the poor and the oppressed, for slaves and laborers, and even resident aliens.\textsuperscript{37} Opposite to what the prophets saw in the eighth century, this code provides for the good of all in the community making equity and justice great priorities. Martin Oosthuizen sees the code as a profound piece of ethical literature that fosters a community of brothers and actively opposes poverty.\textsuperscript{38} It ought to be used practically “to engender concrete deeds of social care” even today.\textsuperscript{39} Under this sort of code, “the poor and needy will celebrate and shout because of the \textsc{lord}, the holy God of Israel” (Isa. 29:19 CEV). This code lays down what is contrary to selfish impulses, it flourishes on giving.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 271.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Carol J. Dempsey, \textit{Hope Amid the Ruins: The Ethics of Israel’s Prophets} (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 39.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 56.
\end{itemize}
Thus far the argument has been that autonomous ethics replaced deontological ethics in the prosperous and materially-driven kingdoms of eighth century Judah and Israel. What was needed for oppressive and unjust society was a return to the source of ethics: Yahweh. Some have proposed that a deontological approach need not be the only approach. In fact, when we think of the Torah, or even the Decalogue (which, of course is a section inside Torah), as an objective and reasonable referent for behaviors in community, a teleological definition tends to fit better. This is not to say that Yahweh is not the ultimate source, but that as it stands, Torah directs the life of people in community to a certain good end by identifying and promoting excellent ways in which to live. Yahweh’s idea of just community is held up in Torah not always because ‘thus saith the Lord,’ but because it provides “a system by which to live the whole life in the presence of God rather than a set of detailed regulations to cover every individual situation... to imitate God, to do the things God would do if God were a human.” Torah relies on a measure of human cooperation and reasonableness so that the good principles contained in it can be applied to

40. Rodd, 67.

41. Ibid., 86-91. Rodd’s comments about the Ten Commandments are thought-provoking as he asserts they are not the source of ethics for the Old Testament. He comes close to asserting an autonomous ethic for the early Israelites based on what was good for community (275-277). As we have seen, this sense often failed to produce what was actually good for everyone. The ethic we must take away from the biblical witness must find referent in the Decalogue.

42. Jensen, 13; Rodd (74-76) vigorously criticizes the suggestion of imitating God in favor of obeying God.
the good of community. In the end, though, we have seen that both a deontological and teleological source for ethics can be manipulated for self-interest, and thus the human condition.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the prophets surveyed in this paper that the poor are a priority for God. Oppression, injustice, and inequity are practical effects that come not of the sorts of principles he has given. That is not to say that there will not be poor among us. But it is to say that in God’s vision, the poor are not denied the things they need in the hour of their greatest needs simply so some may have more. I introduced some statements and arguments in the introduction that bring this issue very much to the fore for us today. I think it is clear that making an appeal to the law of God for restricting resources to the poor is foolish. The prophets speak to our own materialistic culture and challenge us, as they did their original audience(s), to stop exporting our own values onto what God has established to teach us his value. Those who have the audacity to claim that the Ten Commandments support an argument that it is unlawful to give the poor what they require by taking some from the rich have not understood the true God. Instead they have committed idolatry and placed themselves and their values onto God’s good law and perverted it. Our task as Christian people in Christian churches may be to argue against what those
people have claimed. Even more, though, it is our task to take the indictments and teachings of the prophets seriously, assess our rabid materialism, and recall the true source of our ethics: God Almighty. In that day we will, like the poor, celebrate and rejoice. We must find our ethical source in God and we must live in the principles of the good life he has laid down.
Bibliography

Academic Sources


News and Commentary Sources


